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COVID-19 origins: plain speaking is overdue

The Lancet Microbe

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SARS-CoV-2 is a natural virus that found its way into humans through mundane contact with infected wildlife that went on to cause the most consequential pandemic for over a century. While it is scholarly to entertain alternative hypotheses, particularly when evidence is scarce, these alternative hypotheses have been implausible for a long time and have only become more-so with increasing scrutiny. Those who eagerly peddle suggestions of laboratory involvement have consistently failed to present credible arguments to support their positions.

Take the time to reflect on the paragraph above and how many words were expended to make the simple point that COVID-19 had a natural origin. This is because there are many people, most notably in the USA, with disproportionate influence who are poised to seize on less explicit statements to undermine a simple, and pretty straightforward, truth. These are the same people who are willing to malign individuals—a topical example being former director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci—who dedicated themselves to understanding and lessening the impact of the pandemic.

The sheer hubris needed to underpin alternative hypotheses was an early signal of their tenuousness, when we are intensely aware that the natural processes needed to bring about this sort of pandemic are constantly churning and testing the boundaries between animal and human populations. The most



able thing about the whole COVID-19 origin saga is the confected controversy over something that could not be controversial at all. The thing that should be controversial is how little of the error



expended over this discussion has been directed towards actual beneficial outcomes.

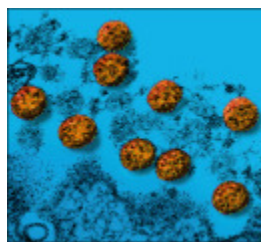
To be frank, the fanciful ideas put forward by self-described free thinkers are more in keeping with popular movies than the realities of working with pathogens. It is admirable to pursue curiosity wherever it might lead and to reject the constraints of received wisdom when exploring the unknown, but doubling down on flawed assumptions in the face of growing evidence calls motivations into question. It is difficult to say what these motivations might be, and it is certain that not everyone has the same reasons for their intransigence. It is well within the bounds of probability that some people genuinely believe in an unnatural origin of SARS-CoV-2, but these people are simply wrong.

Being wrong, and fearlessly so, is part and parcel of robust enquiry, but those who platform these flawed arguments without responsible levels of scrutiny have serious questions to answer. Uncovering COVID-19 origins and the actions that follow will have profound consequences. So those elevating fringe theories (fringe at least in terms of validity if not in terms of popular opinion) are actively creating risks for us all. This topic is not so trivial to be left to the instincts of commentators paid by the word or media outlets seeking the next titillating headline. But news outlets focussing on entertainment over information is so commonplace now that it can seem futile to highlight that this is a failing.

Worse than the irresponsibility of media pundits are the politically motivated actors, although they can be one and the same. In the USA in particular, they have produced amateurish reports that have even misrepresented work published in *The Lancet Microbe*. And, more recently, they have engaged in what they would describe as an official investigation, but to the dispassionate observer seem like attempts at political point scoring against both domestic and foreign opponents. These exercises have involved raking through the correspondence of scientists and public servants to find any slip that might provide them with evidence to back up their arguments. They have found nothing.

A worrying potential consequence of this saga is that it might have a chilling effect on the pursuit of answers in the future on both COVID-19 and new potential threats. With researchers unwilling to ask questions freely for fear of being persecuted when facts lead to inevitable refinement or revision of earlier conclusions. So, while we should defend the right to ask awkward questions, we should also defend the right to change our minds. In summary, although the finer details of the events leading to the COVID-19 pandemic will take time to uncover, the story is one of a series of largely unremarkable steps coalescing to produce a momentous event—a perfect storm if you will. Those arguing for other explanations have their reasons, but none of these are public safety.





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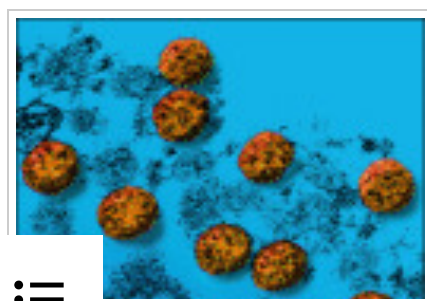
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